

Interview

Katharine Stout in conversation with Ori Gersht

Katharine Stout

The significant event for your work and the starting point for this book was your trip to Sarajevo at the end of the war. What were your expectations when setting off on this journey?

Ori Gersht

I tried not to set particular expectations – the idea of the journey was the romantic notion of facing the unknown. I’m thinking about explorers and somebody like Columbus getting lost and then finding America, but also the idea of just taking a boat and sailing while not sure if the globe is round or flat. The excitement that there will be something magical awaiting them on the other side gives them the motivation to go forward.

At the time there was huge coverage of the war in Sarajevo, yet when the war was over, suddenly no information came at all. One of the attractions for me is that I’m Israeli and I have lived all my life as part of an ethnic conflict. The conflict in Israel is such that it doesn’t matter what my opinions are, I’m always emotionally involved. So Sarajevo is a place with which I have an affinity, but at the same time I’m a total outsider. In my mind there is a real vitality at the end of war. It’s a kind of stripping away of the sentiment and the sorrow caused by the war itself – there is the necessity to pull through.

KS

This search that you’re talking about – a journey in order to find something, is that to do with finding certain things in that particular destination or was it more about finding things in yourself?

OG

It’s a combination of the two. I think that the road movie, as an archetype, represents very much these ideas – for example ‘Apocalypse Now’. Martin Sheen is taking this long journey to meet Marlon Brando, or rather to kill Colonel Kurtz. The journey is physical, yet at the core of this movie is the inner journey that Martin Sheen is going through. It’s represented really well in the beginning of the

film where Sheen is in the hotel looking at himself in the mirror and punching it, shattering his own reflection. And then at the end of the film, when Martin Sheen faces Colonel Kurtz, he is actually facing himself, his own image, and killing Kurtz is almost like killing the ghost inside himself. There is the physicality of the trip but there is also a psychological trip.

In 'Invisible Cities' by Italo Calvino, Kublai Khan says to Marco Polo 'Don't tell me where you've been – I'll tell you where you've been' and he starts talking about the cities that Marco Polo has been in. At this point you start to understand that the entire journeys, although they seem so grand, are inside their head. This kind of tension between the journeys that are internal and the physicality of a voyage is fantastically evoked in this book. Calvino was actually writing about one city – Venice – and all the descriptions are different facets of the same place. In my work, although I'm taking physical journeys and the visual language between them changes radically, there is very much the image of Calvino's invisible city in my head. I would like every journey to represent this metaphysical space rather than just geographical.

KS

One of the striking things about the Sarajevo photographs is that the only people depicted are part of a crowd. In this sense your photographs are very different from the journalistic reportage of war or the after-effects of war that often offer a very emotive portrayal of victims in this situation. Is this deliberate?

OG

In Sarajevo I wanted to take a photographic position that was as democratic as I could make it. When I looked at the buildings, I almost conceived them as some kind of living organism where the concrete was not dead and cold, but actually retaining many of those experiences. In those photographs, if you look carefully there are immense details; scars that were created by the war and are now part of the building and at the same time there are coloured curtains, growing plants and laundry. These are all signs of renewal and hope for the future. It's not about how terrible the situation is but about how these paradoxes co-exist. The details are very subtle, so the tragedy is inside the photographs but only in a way that a very

attentive viewer can pick up.

KS

Your next journey, from Krakow to Auschwitz, meant an engagement with very personal as well as universal tragedy, and as you were talking about, a sense of time and history. Did you have any preconceptions about how you would deal with the overwhelming history of this location?

OG

Firstly my family is from Krakow and the second is the statement from Adorno that there won't be any lyrical poetry after Auschwitz. Photographs always struggle in places like these because a photograph is good at recording detail, but it cannot talk about the depth of the emotion in the events that took place. I was interested in the challenge of what can happen in a place the camera can never deal with. Also, now that I'm not living in Israel, there are lots of issues that seem poignant and relevant. I am suspended between two cultures and so the awareness of my roots is becoming much clearer: I think that this journey is a consequence of that.

KS

The *White Noise* series that you made on the journey are probably the most abstract photographs you've made. How did you make them for one thing – but also what did you feel when you printed them out and actually saw them for the first time?

OG

The pictures that were taken from the train were a kind of coincidence. I decided to take the train from Krakow to Auschwitz and it was the first morning that snow was falling in Poland. When I was on the train, it struck me that it was the same train that took the prisoners from the ghetto in Krakow to the death-camp in Auschwitz so I started to look through the window. What I'm saying now is probably a cliché and occurred to many people on this train before. However, I saw some evidence of human presence or small villages and I was thinking about the people travelling in those trains 60 years ago who couldn't look outside because they were in cattle trains. So I thought I should photograph these things that were witnesses 60 years ago. I took my camera out and it's a waist-level camera, which means that I'm not looking directly through the eye, I'm holding it

and looking down from above. I tried to hold the camera at 90 degrees to the window but by doing this I couldn't anticipate what was ahead of me. So every time I saw a house or concrete evidence I tried to take a photograph but I kept missing it. It became a journey of frustration. When I started to process those films in London, I was very surprised and excited because I realised that in those photographs I was capturing the absences – which in turn capture the real experience I had in Poland.

KS

Although you were born and brought up in Israel, your photographs taken there have the sense of detachment found in works you've made as a visitor to more unfamiliar destinations. Having lived in London for 14 years does your distance from Israel allow you a fresh perspective on your homeland as well as on Britain?

OG

I'm not an exile, I'm placed here totally by choice but obviously my perspective is changing continuously. My perspective on British culture is that of an outsider and it's the same in Israel. The more time passes by, the more I'm able to engage with Israeli culture in ways which I couldn't have if I was living there. For a long time I have thought about this in relation to photography. Photography since its invention was obsessed with the exotic and the other. You look at American photography and in particular Diane Arbus, Robert Frank and Gary Winogrand, who are the children of immigration. Their fascination with America is about this notion of not belonging and coming to a new culture. For me it happened very strongly in the school photographs that I took in England.

KS

I think certainly that's what the schools bring out, the whole debate about personal context. My old school could easily be one of these post-war buildings and I bring to these series memories of children running around, school dinners and noise. This is an association that many people growing up in England in the last 40 years will share, and what makes these photographs very interesting is that you're removing those emotional associations and looking at them as architecture, which I suspect few people have done.

OG

Initially I just noticed that these schools tend to have fantastic colours to them. Then I started to talk to architects and I found out that all these schools are the consequence of the Blitz in the Second World War. Many of the schools in the south-east of England and the Midlands were destroyed and they looked for cheap and efficient methods of building, so they took on the modernist style. In England, modernism in architecture is very often a consequence of pragmatic necessity and not ideological reasons. For me as an outsider these buildings were quite exotic and there was a certain excitement about finding them. In one architectural review I found a suggestion that they should be called 'knowledge factories', because of the modernist functionality of buildings.

Although these photographs take on the language of typological photography, such as the Bechers', people who grew up here associate these places immediately with sentiment and with personal memories, so for them it's not just a historical statement about modernism. I think what starts to happen is about the kind of negotiation between the historical and ideological issues and personal narratives. Personally, I can never resist challenging the coolness of the typological image with lyricism; I always find myself drifting toward the poetic.

KS

The desert series have a timeless quality as if the land has been witness to centuries of history, has been there for years and years, and yet remains physically unaltered. The only human traces are the tyre tracks. It often seems in your photographs that you're picking up on a trace or a subtle mark of history. Is that true for the desert work?

OG

Well the original journey was to the Judea desert, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. During biblical times it used to be a place for contemplation and retreat and also a place for political refugees. The journey started by following those traces, or following those tracks. I was interested in this because the Judea desert is a dividing area between Israel and the West Bank.

We couldn't really travel in most areas of the desert because it was dangerous. So the whole journey was structured to follow the events of the past,

but it was actually caught in the present and the images that came are of universal spaces in the end. They are almost anonymous and at the same time the history that is embedded in this land for the last 4,000 years is (I'm saying 4,000 years as I'm taking the Bible as some kind of reference) is immense and it's one of the things that puzzled me. There is a lot of mess and historical claims to this land yet you look and there some tyre marks but there is nothing else. In this respect it relates to the pictures in Poland: it's about the whole notion of history or our inherent history in the reality of the places.

KS

The series of photographs that were taken in London depict the one aspect of the city that people rarely look at – the sky. How did these photographs come about?

OG

I used to live in north London and when I moved south I rented a flat in a tower block, on the 14th floor. London is very low and all of a sudden I was on top of the world. I was able to wake up in the morning and see the sunrise and it's spectacular. For about a year and a half I slept in a bed by the window. Initially I just photographed hundreds of images at different times of the day, and some of them became interesting, which is what often happens in the photographic process. Occasionally there would be a mistake or a coincidence and I would try to capitalise on it. I also see these pictures as documentary photographs of London. Rather than depicting the city, they are once again depicting the ambience of the city. It's in the centre of London and there is this intense activity on the ground and its emanating into the sky. So we get all these colours that are radiating light from below. The colours are so spectacular: it seems as if they have been manipulated but they haven't.

KS

Yes, the vibrancy and the intensity of the colours look as if they could have been computer manipulated and yet none of your work is digitally enhanced. Is that important to you?

OG

It's very important but not because I have any ideological reservations. With my work, I'm really interested in perception of spaces and in this kind of dialogue

between my eyes, the camera and the space that is in front of me. Through this relationship, something happens that opens up possibilities of how space is perceived. I find the experience quite mystical. I imagine that the night sky is black so I never see in it any different colour, but the camera accumulates light over a long period of time and the black starts to open up and there are many layers underneath it.

Katharine Stout is a curator at Tate Britain, UK.